DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 322 SP 038 118

TITLE	Policy and Excellent Teaching: Focus for a National Research Center. Center Description and Synopsis of Research Program.
INSTITUTION	Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, Seattle, WA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1998-03-00
NOTE	12p.
CONTRACT	R308B70003
AVAILABLE FROM	University of Washington, Box 353600, College of Education, Miller Hall M201, Seattle, WA 98195-3600.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Change Strategies; *Educational Change; *Educational Policy; *Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Excellence in Education; *Policy Formation; Public Education; Teacher Competencies; Teacher Recruitment; Teaching Conditions; Teaching Skills

ABSTRACT

A new national research consortium, the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (CTP), is designed to investigate the relation between excellent teaching and policymaking at the national, state, and local levels. Policy efforts to produce excellence in teaching must: (1) attract, recruit, and retain capable teachers; (2) develop teachers' professional norms, knowledge, and skills; (3) create incentives and organizational conditions that support teachers' work; (4) realize improvement efforts on a sufficient scale; and (5) ensure that teacher development and teaching practice relates to improved student learning. Increasing excellence in teaching requires coordinated action on a range of fronts. In the last decade there has been a growing recognition that both perspectives--the macro view from the level of the system as a whole, and the micro view from the classroom and school--are important to any promising effort to improve teaching. The CTP is examining promising experiences and experiments for addressing the five issues. This includes standards-based, school-based, and teacher development strategies, all of which overlap and have at their intersection coherent management of the teacher policy environment. The existence of promising strategies creates a need for research. The CTP's program of research seeks to cumulate understanding, both within and across studies, regarding the strategies' potency and possibilities. The CTP's program of research and analysis examines teacher policies in various contexts and at multiple levels of the system. The various investigations that CTP members are currently conducting are listed. (SM)

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March 1998

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Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy

A Consortium of Five Universities

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON (lead institution)

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

TEACHERS COLLEGE/COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Other active participants in CTP's research and dissemination program include researchers affiliated with Cornell University, the Learning Research & Development Center (LRDC) at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of California at Santa Barbara, Indiana University, and the University of South Carolina.

Other Federally Funded Research and Development Organizations Allied with CTP

- Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE)
- Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE)
- National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching (NPEAT)
- National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF)

The work reported herein was supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, PR/Award Number R308B70003, as administered by the National Institute on Educational Governance, Finance, Policymaking and Management, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute, OERI, or the U.S. Department of Education, or the endorsement of the federal government.

Introduction

A new national research consortium—the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (CTP)—has been created to investigate the relation between excellent teaching and policymaking at national, state, and local levels. The Center receives support from the National Institute for Educational Governance, Finance, Policymaking, and Management of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in the U. S. Department of Education. This synopsis describes how Center members view the problems confronting policymakers, promising policy responses, and the work of the Center in relation to those responses.

The Policy Problem: Promoting Excellent Teaching

In our view, any policy efforts aiming to produce excellence in teaching on a broad scale must:

(1) ***Attract, recruit, and retain capable people in the teaching profession.***

From the earliest time of entry into a training program, to recruitment into particular teaching positions, improvement efforts need to draw capable people to teaching. Policies must then motivate them to perform well and grow in their professional roles, and sustain their engagement with teaching throughout a teaching career.

(2) ***Develop teachers' professional norms, knowledge, and skill.***

Policy must support efforts to equip teachers with the kinds of knowledge and normative understandings about their work that are necessary to realize ambitious, socially desired ends for students' education. Put another way, teacher improvement efforts must create a rich set of learning opportunities and intellectual resources to support teachers' acquisition of norms, knowledge, and skill throughout their teaching careers. The need is equally great for veterans and beginning teachers.

(3) ***Create incentives and organizational conditions that support teachers' work.***

It must create and support workplaces which are conducive to student and teacher learning over time. Teachers need to be rewarded appropriately for their work, both individually and collectively.

(4) ***Realize improvement efforts on a sufficient scale, and do so equitably, within a diverse, fragmented educational environment.***

In short, strategies aimed at teacher improvement must find ways to work "downward" from central plans to broad enactment, or outward

from a few promising small-scale efforts to many. In so doing, they must accommodate enormous inequalities, rapid demographic and cultural change, and extraordinarily fragmented influence patterns that impede coherent policy and efforts to scale up.

(5) Ensure that teacher development and teaching practice must relate to improved student learning.

It is not enough for motivated, capable teachers to develop the right skills in supportive workplaces. Their teaching—and the activities they engage in to develop their teaching—must be demonstrably linked to improvements in student learning. In one sense, excellence in teaching presumes such links.

These five issues are both pervasive and systemically related to one another, and the nation is far from solving them in any fundamental way. While there are many excellent teachers, policymakers still face a substantial, systemic challenge in addressing these kinds of issues.

The Policy Response to Date

The challenge to policy is thus formidable. Solving any one of these five problems requires solutions to the others. Excellent recruitment strategies, for example, that bring eager and capable teachers into schools which offer a stifling work environment are bound to fail, both from the point of view of the teachers and their students. Attempts to make the workplace a more attractive and rewarding environment will get nowhere without the development of professional norms that encourage taking advantage of the environment. Hence, increasing excellence in teaching requires coordinated action on a range of fronts.

The challenge of mobilizing such efforts has increased in recent decades, as public education in the United States faces unprecedented challenges. An inadequately-prepared teaching force confronts more social problems than ever before in our history. The quality of teaching, as many studies and task forces have argued since the 1950s, is a national concern. At the same time, the prospects for improvement are unprecedented: pressure for improved performance has increased, efforts to improve schools have multiplied, and new actors and agencies have engaged issues of teaching excellence. If the problems of teaching have never been so dramatic, the opportunities for change have never been greater.

Two divergent perspectives on the policy problem have dominated the conversation about improved teaching. One, a view from the "top" or outside of classrooms and schools, has been taken by many members of the public and their elected representatives, many policymakers, parents, employers, and businessmen. From this vantage point, the most pressing problems are

located in the mismatch between what society expects and needs and what students know and are able to do. The nation's teaching corps, many critics maintain, generally lacks the talent, preparation, or incentives to prepare students for life and work in the 21st century. Further, many of the best teachers leave. These ideas are associated with a long history of public suspicion about teachers and equivocal attitudes about whether or how the quality of teaching could be improved. Some of the policy responses associated with this view of the problem have emphasized control, inspection, and new incentives. The conception of the problem and its solution has been broadly systemic, and the solutions proposed presume the capacity to control events at the macro and micro levels.

The other perspective is situated in classrooms. Held by many teachers, researchers who study teaching, and groups allied with the teaching profession, this perspective highlights the multiple demands of teachers' working lives and the conditions under which they try to engage students in learning. While many teachers and researchers acknowledge the existence of individuals who should not be in the classroom, they also point to the ways in which the workplace frustrates efforts by many competent teachers to do better. They point to the limited resources that accompany demands for tougher standards and more challenging academic content, the flood of nonacademic problems that contemporary students bring to school, and the competing and often contradictory pressures imposed by the educational policy context as factors that limit their ability or willingness to improve students' learning outcomes. This way of viewing the policy problem concentrates on how coherently policies converge at the school and in the classroom, support classroom practice, and enable teachers' professional growth. This conception of the problem is thus more localized, more focused on the individual circumstances of particular teachers and schools, and more rooted in notions of teachers' learning and growth over time.

Recently it has become more clear that, while each approach has much to recommend it, each has grievous shortcomings without the other. The success of standards-based reform policies, for instance, depends on extensive improvement in the knowledge and skills teachers bring to planning and daily classroom work. By the same token, teacher development alone, without broad systemic support, cannot be expected to have much effect. Similarly, efforts to hold teachers accountable for a higher level of student achievement are empty demands if teachers' workplace settings do not support their efforts to teach better or differently. Success in any facet of teacher improvement requires a range of supports and acknowledgment of the opportunities, limits, and realities at both the system and classroom levels.

One encouraging feature of the last decade has been a growing recognition that both perspectives—the macro view from the level of the system as a whole, and the micro view from the classroom and school—are important to any promising effort to improve teaching. This recognition has been evident in some recent "systemic" efforts to improve teaching. For

example, standards-based reform in Kentucky includes extensive provision for teachers' professional development and for teachers' participation in decisions about their work. Similarly, reforms in states as diverse as Vermont, California, and Michigan, and local efforts in many cities—Philadelphia, parts of New York City, and El Paso, among them—have made attention to teacher development a central feature of standards-based reform.

Another encouraging feature of the last decade is the explosion of experimentation with ways to improve teaching and schooling. Teacher rewards of various kinds, mentoring and peer-coaching arrangements, work redesign and school restructuring, teacher education renewal, the growth of intentional learning communities, and experiments with new ways to recruit and reward teachers are only a small sample of the experiments under way. Whatever roadblocks our decentralized and fragmented system poses for reform, it is also remarkably open to new ideas.

In the proliferation of ways and means for addressing teacher excellence, and in the growing recognition that approaches rooted in both macro and micro perspectives are essential, lie tremendous opportunities for improving the system. And within these opportunities lie many unanswered and difficult questions which research can help answer.

The Focus of the National Research Center: Promising Policy Strategies

The Center's greatest contribution to the improvement of teaching will lie in the examination of promising experiences and experiments—those instances of strategic, coordinated action that most centrally address the basic problems outlined above. These experiences and experiments are many, but among them, three classes of reform strategy seem to offer the most helpful starting points for addressing the problems confronting teacher excellence. These strategies are particularly promising because they explicitly address all or most of the five problems described earlier.

- ***Standards-based strategies***

  We subsume in this cluster both those strategies that feature student learning standards and those that are built around standards for professional practice. We also include here policies that place curriculum reform at the center of policy action, along with various forms of professional development support, as in the case of curriculum framework initiatives of the mid-1980s in California and elsewhere. In all of these instances, many aspects of teachers' work and careers are directly implicated, as curricular expectations, assessment and accountability pressures, and professional development resources converge on teachers' working lives.

- ***School-based strategies***

  Another class of policy strategy takes the schoolsite as a starting point for reform of teaching. Here, policy seeks to improve teaching by working through school-wide renewal processes, the redesign of the school organization and workday, and the development of the professional community within the school. The goal is to affect the capacity of the school staff, both individually and collectively. This may be accomplished through interaction with high-profile reform networks (as in Accelerated Schools, "Success-for-All" schools, the Coalition of Essential Schools, or Core Knowledge Project schools), or through restructuring activities that are more locally originated and sustained.

- ***Teacher development strategies***

  A third class of policy strategy takes as its starting point the building of teachers' capacities. The primary focus of policy is the development of knowledge, skills, and norms throughout teachers' careers—initially in teacher preparation programs, and subsequently in induction programs and through continuing education—often in the context of partnerships between universities and schools. While professional development plays an important role in all three strategies, here it is arguably central, conceived in career-long terms, and addressed at various stages along teachers' career paths.

These three classes of policy are not discrete, but rather overlap. Examples abound of initiatives that lie at points of intersection among them. Of particular interest are policies that lie at the intersection of all three, which constitute a fourth class of strategy:

- ***Coherent management of the teacher policy environment***

  This strategy is marked by policymakers' imaginative use of the various strands of policy that bear on teachers' work and careers. One finds instances of such management strategies in districts such as Cincinnati, Ohio, and Louisville, Kentucky. These districts combine aggressive recruitment, professional development resources, rewards for accomplished work, mentoring for new teachers, and other strands of teacher policy in a mutually reinforcing web of supports for sustained professional performance in the classroom. Counterparts can be found at a higher governmental level in states such as North Carolina and Connecticut, and the results of coordinated management of resources to support teacher excellence in these settings are beginning to show up in higher student performance.

These four are not the only types of reform strategy that might affect teaching. For example, strategies that seek to change the authority of school people, professionals, or the public to act on behalf of school improvement (as in many decentralization or choice-enhancing strategies) may well influence the incentives for teaching. However, their connection to teaching excellence is less clear or less direct.

The existence of promising strategies prompts the need for research, for these strategies are as problematic as they are promising. From the policymakers' point of view, there are many unanswered questions, among them, the following:

- *What conditions permit these strategies to come into being?*
- *How do these strategies interact with the other features of the policy environments in which they are enacted, including other policies, turbulent social conditions, and changing professional landscapes?*
- *What theories of action do policymakers hold regarding these strategies, and how do they come by their theories?*
- *How, and how much, do these strategies actually address the five central problems in practice, and with what side-effects, if any?*
- *Is there tangible evidence of improvement in students' learning?*
- *How successfully do these strategies attend to issues of equity? Do they promote excellent teaching for the many rather than for the few?*

- *What resources do these strategies take, and how can they be managed within the kinds of resource constraints present in today's public policy environment?*

- *What is the most productive way to conceive of "resources" and "investment" in teaching?*

- *How well might these strategies take root in different kinds of local and community contexts?*

The Center's Program of Research

An approach to answering these questions must, itself, be strategic. Accordingly, the Center team has constructed an agenda and approach to the Center's work that focuses on strategies rather than single-purpose initiatives, and on solutions rather than continued inquiry into the nature of the problems. Furthermore, we invest most of our research resources on strategies that seem most promising, rather than conducting less intensive examinations of the full range of solutions, many of which are demonstrably weak. Our program of research seeks to cumulate understanding, both within and across studies, regarding these strategies' potency and possibilities. Various modes of research inform our understanding, among them, strategic contrasts among cases, large-scale database analyses, close-up examination of effects at the classroom and school level, and other forms of investigation. The Center's research program takes maximum advantage of work already underway by Center members, under the auspices of other centers.

To answer the questions above, we have fashioned a program of research and analysis that examines teacher policies in various contexts and at multiple levels of the system, as summarized below. Several studies take the school (and within it, individual classroom teachers) as the starting point for examining how teacher policies develop opportunities for teacher learning and ultimately influence what teachers do with students. Other studies concentrate instead on the development of teacher policy environments at the district level, and from that vantage point assess ways in which district-level activities and conditions shape teachers' work and careers. Still others consider the macro environment created at the state level and trace its connections to classrooms and teachers. Cross-cutting analyses of several kinds enable the Center team to synthesize what is learned from these different investigations into an integrated understanding of the development, implementation, and impact of teacher policies. Finally, several working conferences and other forms of analytic work add perspective to the understandings that emerge from the Center's field-based investigations.

Center members are engaged in the following investigations:

- ***Studies of state and district policy environments, as "contexts for excellent teaching", linked to a study of schools' organization to support teacher and student learning.***

  Designed and conducted jointly, these studies comprise a "Core Study" with nested samples that enable empirical, as well as conceptual, connections among the different lines of investigation. Additional analyses contrast what has been learned from twelve states working with the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future.

- ***Studies of the relation among teacher learning opportunities, student achievement, and reform interventions.***

  In schools engaged in a variety of well-established interventions, as well as in settings in which instructional improvement activities are initiated and designed by the school, we look closely at how teachers are supported in the learning they must do to improve their practice, and at the consequences for student learners.

- ***Studies of the effects of strategies emphasizing professional and other standards.***

  Here, the Center's work focuses on the means by which standards-based reforms shape the opportunities for teachers to learn and develop.

- ***Studies and analyses of teacher development strategies and policy influences on them.***

  Studies focus mainly on the transition of teachers from teacher education programs into the profession, and in the preparation of teachers for student diversity.

- ***Analyses of teacher recruitment and retention, and of the relative costs of teacher policies.***

  Drawing on national databases, and on the databases assembled in the Core Study, these analyses examine more deeply particular facets of the teacher policy problem.

- ***Analyses of policy strategies undertaken by other nations for improving teaching.***

  In collaboration with international scholars and others engaged in cross-national comparative research, we synthesize what can be learned about teacher improvement from a variety of other nations, and design research to explore this topic further.

These studies and analyses result in various kinds of products, among them, research reports, books, journal articles, annotated bibliographies, and conference presentations. In addition, policy briefs and other products target particular audiences and uses in the broad community of groups interested in the improvement of teaching.

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American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education
American Association of School Administrators
American Federation of Teachers
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
Council for Chief State School Officers
International Reading Association
National Alliance of Business
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Boards of Education
National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
National Conference of State Legislatures
National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of Teachers of English
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